

John Dryden as a Liberal Classicist

The most distinctive quality of Dryden as a critic is his liberal outlook on literature which widened as his critical powers developed and matured. His "changing tastes and interests helped to make him responsive to different kinds of literary skill and artistic conventions, thus giving him that primary qualification of the good practical critic - the ability to read the work under consideration with full and sympathetic understanding."

Though a keen admirer of the classical achievement, Dryden was never a servile imitator of the rules of Classical writing. He was highly sensitive to the changing tastes of people and to the requirements of his own age. He refused to pay blind allegiance to any authority howsoever great it be. He substituted Reason for the Ancients as the authority for literary judgements. At one place he wrote: "It is not enough that Aristotle has said so, for Aristotle drew his models of tragedy from Sophocles and Euripides: and if he had seen ours, might have changed his mind." He was always conscious of his own freedom. In his Defence of the Epilogue he wrote: "For we live in an age of sceptical, that as it determines little, so it takes nothing from antiquity on trust."

Dryden's attitude to the ancients was not that of idolatry. Professor Tillyard commends his independent attitude when he writes: "Freed from a superstitious regard for the ancients he used his commonsense and skill to look at them quite coolly and with no more initial respect which he accorded to the writers of his own day. The result is that perfection of tone in matters of comparative literature that has not been equalled before or since. And this is paramount critical achievement." W.P. Ker also admires his independence in matters of literary judgement: "His virtue is that in a time when literature was pestered and cramped with formulas, he found it impossible to write otherwise than freely. He is sceptical, tentative, disengaged, where most of his contemporaries

and most of his successors for a hundred years, are pledged to certain dogmas and principles."

Dryden's free critical disposition is shown in his rejection of all arbitrary bans upon freedom of composition and freedom of judgement. Though not revolutionary in taste as to throw away all the accepted critical canons of the neo-classical school, he does not hesitate in repudiating some of the outmoded notions. He does not make a fetish of the so-called Rules. It is this quality which sets him apart from the 'finicky French Critics' of his age who were busy forging letters to curb the freedom of the creative artist. Dryden's best contribution to criticism lies in the modification of the ancient doctrines in the light of modernity rather than in the creation of some radically new theories. He believes that too strict an observance of the rules is fatal to many artistic effects. He prefers "the variety and copiousness of the English plays, with their "under-plots or by-concernments" to the French ideal of the singleness of plot. He argues that English plays in having these underplots, add a pleasant variety and "afford a greater pleasure to the audience". French plays may be more regular and practise but they lack the warmth, vigour and variety of the English drama. His ultimate taste of judging a play is liveness of imitation rather than cold regularity or exactness of representation. What rules can justify or explain the miracle of Shakespeare's genius or of the Elizabethan dramatists? - Dryden seems to ask. He is against a 'servile observation of the unities of time and place' in so far as they circumscribe the scope of the dramatist and often force him to resort to 'absurd contrivances'. He sees no reason why the English practice of mingling tragic and comic elements should be forbidden against the French practice of their rigid separation. He argues that tragic-comedy is not in artistic, since we can, in fact, enjoy both

gaiety and sadness together; the one serves to relieve the other. He affirms that the English 'have invented, increased and perfected a more pleasant way of writing for the stage than was ever known to the Ancients or moderns of any nation, which is Tragi-Comedy.'

Such boldness of assertions and freedom from exclusive elegance to set rules are rarely to be found among Dryden's Contemporaries or his predecessors. He combined in himself the creative vision of an artist and the mental incisiveness of a literary critic. There was a perfect fusion of feeling and reason in him. His catholic temperament and uncommon imaginative sympathy enabled him to see 'the merits of several divergent literary traditions'. His comprehensive survey of the different dramatic ideas - ancient, French and English - and his illuminating appreciations of Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher and Ben Jonson in the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* and his penetrating study of Chaucer in the *Preface to the Fables* illustrate this point. He is almost phenomenally able to see the merits of these writers but he is not blind to their peculiar limitations. Referring to Dryden's substantial contributions Atkins remarks: "His reputation as a critic therefore rests on sure and lasting foundations. In an age of transition and much confusion he set criticism of new and fruitful lines, pointing to the other standards and method than those commended by the French neo-classical school; And his work remains today as readable and suggestive as ever, the legacy of one of the greatest English critics."

